



Looking south on Ewing Street in the 1880s. Porter Flats is on the left and Sanders House (with cupola before remodeling) on the right.

A Walking Tour of Helena's Historic Courthouse Square and Central Neighborhood



Lewis and Clark County Courthouse, 1887

Montana Historical Society

1. 106 Broadway: U.S. Assay Office (1875)

U.S. Treasury architects designed the stately assay building, but Helenans thought it "old-fashioned" a decade later. It was the first officially recorded federal building constructed in Montana Territory. Helena's branch was one of five U.S. assay offices and a convenience to miners who, during the early days, had to send or take their gold to the Philadelphia mint or pay exorbitant conversion fees to local bankers. By 1900, this office had melted \$30 million worth of gold. It operated until 1934.

2. 228 Broadway: Lewis & Clark County Courthouse (1886-87)*

Still used as county courthouse, the handsome building - which once served as territorial and later state capitol - features Bayfield brownstone trim, shipped by rail from Wisconsin. Its magnificent clock tower, said to have never kept the correct time, was a victim of the 1935 earthquakes.

3. 320 Broadway: Cornelius Hedges Home (1878)

As four-term territorial superintendent of schools, Hedges founded Montana's public school system. He was a pioneer attorney and probate judge, a founder of the Montana Historical Society, and a member of the Washburn-Doane party that explored the Yellowstone in 1870. Hedges' Italianate style home was once much more elaborate with a Mansard roof and cupola, but the small front porch and window structure around the doorway are original.

4. 15 North Ewing: Lewis & Clark County Jail (1890)*

This fortress-like Romanesque style institution replaced an 1874 facility at this same location. During construction, prisoners were housed in the Presbyterian Church which once stood on the northwest corner of the courthouse parking lot.

5. 312-314 Breckenridge: Allen Livery/Court Street Stables (c.1875)

Many layers of painted signs make this early building a Helena treasure. The best-preserved local example of an important industry, its simple construction illustrates the beauty of the earliest plain, utilitarian buildings. The upstairs accommodated tenants in livery-related employment.

6. 100-102 North Rodney Street: Rodney Street Hotel (1879-1888)

As early as 1879, a hotel and saloon occupied this corner. By 1884, it was the Rodney Street Hotel. Records show that in 1890, there were more than 40 boarders. Construction occurred in two stages, with the southeast portion first.

7. 200 North Rodney Street: Kenck & Company Saloon (c. 1884)*

Italianate style detailing reflects 1880s fashion while thirteen chimneys reveal upstairs housing that accommodated a population boom precipitated by the advent of the railroad.

8. 310-312 Fifth Avenue: Piercy Boarding House (c. 1888)

The stylish Courthouse Square neighborhood prospered in the 1880s as shown by this very fashionable boarding house with granite-trimmed sandstone facade, metal-faced Mansard roof and colorful stained glass transom. Built by rancher W.C. Child (see #13), and later run by Margaret Piercy, it is a splendid expression of Victorian era architecture.

9. 203 North Ewing: Joseph K. Toole Mansion (1903-04)*

Governor Toole lived here during his third term of office (1904-1908). In August 1904, a gun battle between officials and an escaped prisoner ended with the prisoner's suicide in the basement stairwell.

10. 210-218 North Ewing: Chessman Flats (1891)

An exceptional example of an urban Queen Anne style rowhouse, this multi-family residence was originally five three-story townhouses built by William Chessman (see #11). Gables, bays and a rounded turret-like corner illustrate the architectural exuberance of the period.

11. 302 North Ewing: Original Governor's Mansion (1888)*

Originally the private residence of the William Chessman family, the Queen Anne style home became the first state-owned executive residence in 1913. It is now a museum maintained by the Montana Historical Society.

12. 303 North Ewing: Wesley Biggs Home (1906)

Eugene Wallace Fiske, architect of the Toole House (see #8), designed this home for County Commissioner Wesley Biggs c. 1906. Compare the stone trim to the wood trim of the second- and third- floor Palladian windows.

13. 305 North Ewing: William C. Child Residence (1872)

W.C. Child was appointed territorial land registrar under President Ulysses S. Grant. The Child family continued to live in Helena after 1885 when Child established the White Face Farm (now the Kleffner Ranch) east of Helena.

14. 318 East Sixth Avenue: Child Carriage House (1873)*

The stone barn, originally part of the W.C. Child property, is a rare remaining example of early local masonry. Charlie Russell temporarily bunked in the loft living quarters once used by the Childs' groom.

15. 309 North Ewing: Wellington D. Rankin Home (c. 1906)

The residence of territorial governor Benjamin Potts was originally on this corner. This home, designed by Missoula architects Larson and Greenough, was built by railroad contractor Peter Larson for his son-in-law, C.B. Power. Senator Thomas Carter and later influential attorney Wellington Rankin owned the home. His famous sister, Jeannette, was a frequent guest.

16. 328 North Ewing: Sanders House (1875)*

Attorney Wilbur Fisk Sanders served as one of the new state's first two senators (1890-1893). This home, one of the first on the block, was originally Italianate in style. It was extensively remodeled to its present appearance c. 1890.

17. 335 North Ewing: Porter Flats (1884)*

Pioneer realtor James Porter, developer of much of Helena's West Side, built this Italianate style apartment building, one of the first in Helena. Six original units offered complete housekeeping facilities.

18. 412 North Rodney: Morris Silverman House (1892)

Three fanciful porches stacked pagoda style, intricate ornamentation and imaginative stained glass embellish this glorious Victorian era home built by one of Helena's most prominent Jewish merchants. Morris Silverman crossed the plains with teams of oxen and goods to sell to the miners, settling in Helena in 1867. Silverman presided over the committee to establish the Jewish synagogue (see #20).

19. 416 North Ewing: Herman Gans House (c. late 1870s)*

Herman Gans, a partner in the pioneer clothing firm of Gans & Klein, was congregation president of the Temple Emanu-El (see #20). Fixtures for the Queen Anne style home came up the river to Fort Benton and overland by ox team.

20. 515 North Ewing: Temple Emanu-El (1891)

Helena's substantial Jewish community played a significant role in the early economy. Jacob Feldberg, Morris Silverman and Herman Gans were among the prominent residents of the neighborhood who helped build this "temple amidst the Rockies," the first Jewish synagogue in the Pacific Northwest. The Romanesque style synagogue with its distinctive keyhole windows and rich stained glass had a sanctuary with a 30-foot ceiling. With the waning of the congregation, the State of Montana purchased the building for \$1.00 in the late 1930s. Fortunately, the Catholic Diocese purchased the building for a handsome sum in 1980 and now maintains it.



21. 535 North Ewing: First Presbyterian Church (1891-1904)

Presbyterians formally organized in Helena in 1872 and built their first church at 5th and Ewing in 1876. The cornerstone was laid for this church in 1891, and part of the building completed in 1892. The sanctuary and beautiful stained glass windows were added in 1903-1904. The 1909 pipe organ is still in use.

22. 511 North Warren: Cathedral of St. Helena (1908-1924)

Patterned after the Votive Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Vienna, Austrian-born architect Albert O. Von Herbulis designed this Helena centerpiece built at a cost of \$645,590. The twin spires rise 230 feet from Warren Street and the stained glass windows, crafted in Munich by the famous firm of F.X. Zettler, include 11,696 square feet of art glass. Credit for the building project goes to Bishop John P. Carroll, bishop of Helena from 1904 to 1925. Mining magnate Thomas Cruse donated nearly one-third of the building cost. Peter Larson (see #15) was among the generous contributors. The cornerstone was laid in 1908, the first mass celebrated in 1914 and the interior completed and the church consecrated in 1924. Von Herbulis also designed St. Helena School in 1908. It was staffed by the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth who taught elementary classes from 1909 to 1936 and high school from 1936 until Cathedral High School closed in 1969.

23. 112 Lawrence Street: C. B. Nolan Residence (c. early 1880s)

Cornelius B. Nolan brought his bride, Hattie Shober, to this Italianate style home in 1894. Elected first county attorney after statehood in 1889, Nolan served as state attorney general from 1896 to 1900. Pioneer attorney John H. Shober, Hattie's bachelor uncle, also lived with the family. Shober was elected district attorney in 1864, defeating his good friend, Cornelius Hedges (see #3).

24. 12-16 E. Lawrence: Holter Museum of Art

This 1914 commercial building was the main office of the Benson Motor Company, which had the local Willys-Knight automobile dealership in the 1920s. The Holter opened in 1987 and is the only local museum exclusively devoted to the exhibition of fine arts.

25. 348 North Warren: Central School (1915-1921)*

Montana Territory's first graded school was built here in 1875 on the site of the old mining camp cemetery. By the 1890s, Helena High School and a handsome public library stood to either side. George Carsley designed the "new" Central.

26. 359 North Warren: First Baptist Church (1883-84)

A distinctive spire and octagonal stained glass windows make this place of worship unique. Territorial Governor Preston Leslie was an early member. The tracker-action pipe organ, given in 1900 in memory of his daughter Emily, is still in use. Governor Sam Ford (1941-1949) attended church here, and in the 1960s, so did country singer Charlie Pride.

27. 301-304 North Warren: Kleinschmidt Block (c. 1890)

The eye-catching corner oriel window of this business/apartment block is a Victorian-era gem. Helena's Stedman Foundry made the cast-iron columns.

28. 201 North Warren: Preuitt House (1874)

Businessman William Preuitt built this brick home which offered a wonderful view of the growing town. Liquor dealer Isaac Marks and clothing merchant Henry Klein (of Gans & Klein) were later owners. The home served as rectory for St. Peter's Episcopal Church (1906-1928) which stood across Warren Street.

29. 221 Fifth Avenue: Jacob Feldberg House (1875)*

A prominent member of the Jewish community, merchant Jacob Feldberg was small of stature, but extraordinarily courageous. Feldberg saved this entire block during the fire of 1871, jumping roof tops and directing a bucket brigade. Dubbed "Helena's Paul Revere," Feldberg and his neighbors rebuilt their homes of brick.

30. 100-104 North Ewing/220-214 Breckenridge: Alden Block (1880)

Isaac R. Alden, a supreme court clerk, constructed this territorial building with a residence on half the first-floor. The other half was a law library, convenient to the courthouse a few steps away. The public library was on the second floor. The third floor and Spanish Eclectic style details were added c. 1917.

31. 11-21 N. Warren: Brown Block (c. 1879)

Real estate salesman Wallace W. Brown built this marvelous example of early local masonry. Shops in 1884 included sewing machine and pattern sales, a print shop and a millinery. Lodgings could be secured upstairs.

*Indicates National Register of Historic Places interpretive sign displayed.
Text was compiled from National Register files and other historical sources and written by Ellen Bauml, State Historic Preservation Office, with contributions by Chere Justo and Jon Axline.

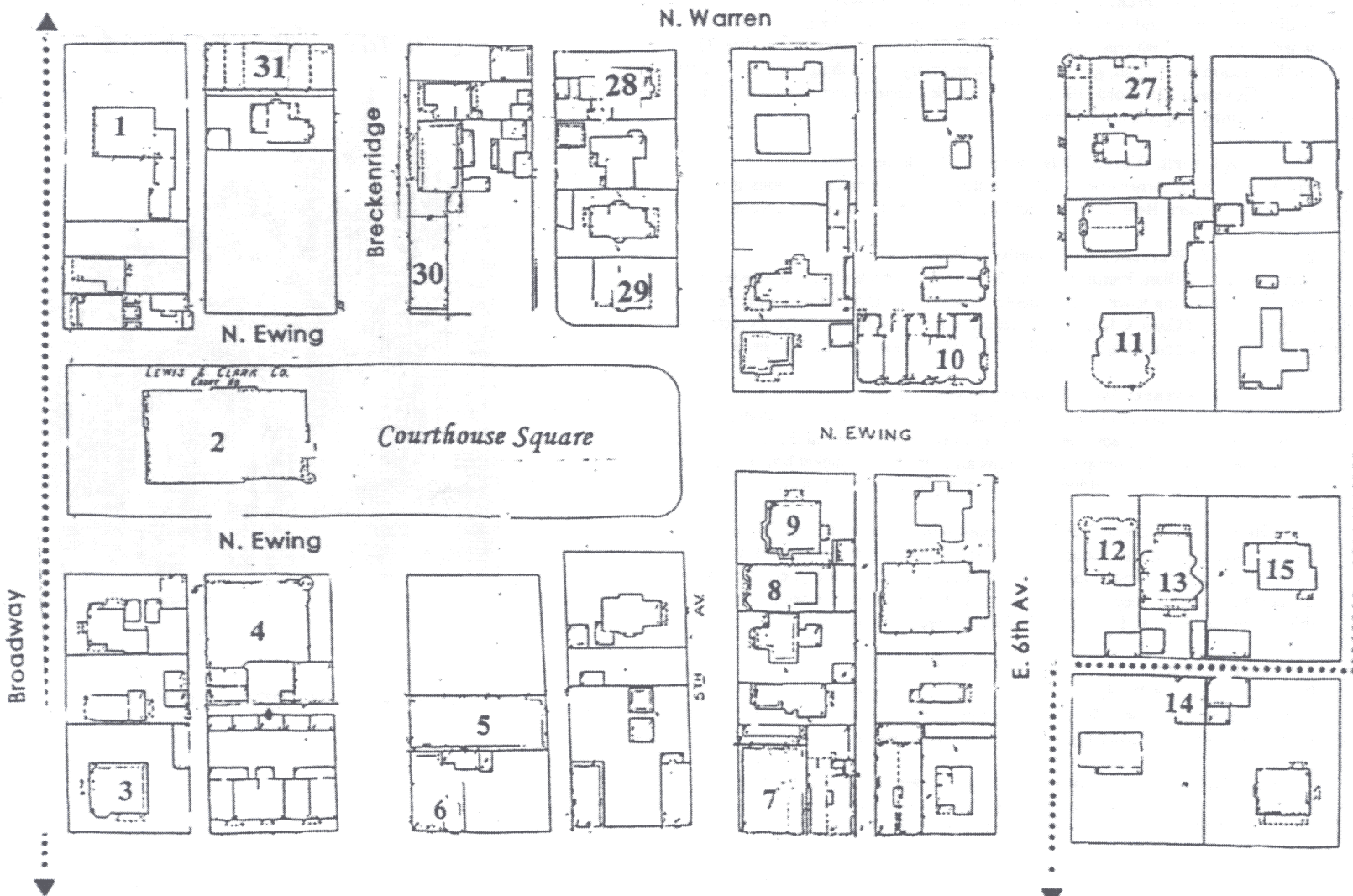
Welcome to Helena's Historic Courthouse Square and Central Neighborhood

Courthouse Square has been the center of Lewis and Clark County justice since the first courthouse was built upon the platted green in 1867. When territorial government moved from Virginia City to Helena in 1875, the county courthouse became the Territorial Capitol Building as well. Government officials and employees naturally settled nearby, but there was another reason for residential development around Courthouse Square. The location offered a safe haven from the devastating fires that plagued the early community. Few were untouched by these conflagrations. Residents sought higher ground along Ewing, Fifth Avenue and upper Broadway away from Main Street where wooden buildings crowded together and the wind often whipped mercilessly through the gulch. For both official and practical reasons, some of Helena's oldest homes are thus clustered around historic Courthouse Square.

The homes of the 1870s represent Helena's first planned residential area and by the end of the decade, some very prominent citizens had settled in the neighborhood. Among them were Wilbur Fisk Sanders, William Child, Cornelius Hedges, Territorial Governor Benjamin Potts and a number of respected Jewish businessmen including Herman Gans, Isaac Marks, Henry Klein and Jacob Feldberg. Central School, the U.S. Assay Office, a substantial jail across from the courthouse, a major livery complex, boardinghouses, a church and Rodney Street businesses formed a microcosmic community.

In 1883 the railroad linked Helena to outside markets and the town was bursting with people and opportunity. Boardinghouses continued to thrive but newfangled apartment buildings like Porter Flats, offering complete housekeeping units, were a manifestation of Helena's new urban identity. Fine homes, many in Italianate and Queen Anne styles, began to fill in the empty spaces and by the end of the 1880s, residential streets had assumed much of their present identities.

..... Helena Historic District Boundaries

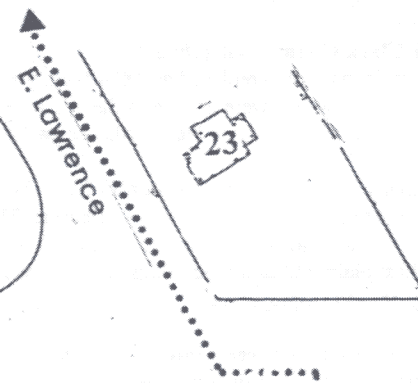
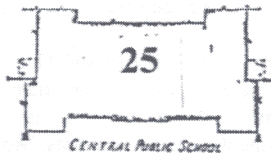


The halls of the courthouse must have resounded with cheers when word of statehood was received there in 1889, marking the building's instant transition from Territorial Capitol to interim State Capitol. The building functioned thus until 1902. An impressive new jail, the splendid Temple Emanu-El, the new Presbyterian Church, a new high school and a public library/auditorium were the last major projects undertaken before the Silver Panic of 1893 brought construction to a standstill. After the turn of the century, Governor J. K. Toole, County Commissioner Wesley Biggs and young Charles B. Power (son of wealthy Senator T. C. Power) built fine homes in the neighborhood. Finally, between 1908 and 1924, the Cathedral of St. Helena and St. Helena School grew to anchor the north end, shifting Catholic worship and elementary education away from long-established Catholic Hill on the other side of Broadway.

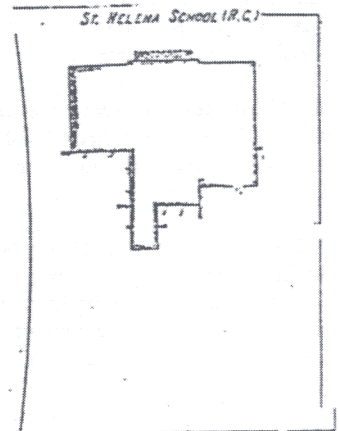
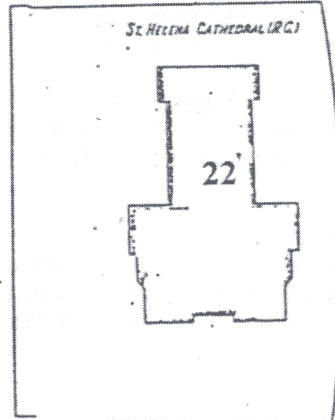
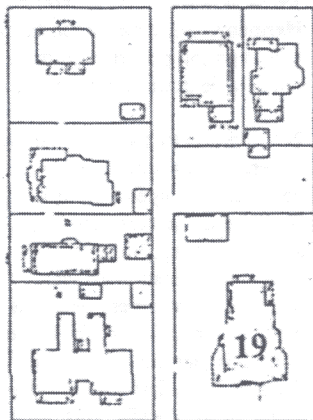
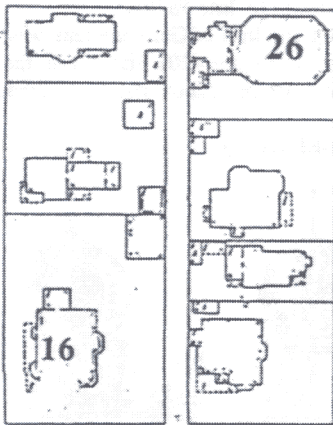
Mother Nature vied with the built environment when a series of earthquakes rocked the area in October of 1935. The courthouse clock tower, the high school, many chimneys and brick veneer fell victim in this part of town. Homes and businesses were repaired with determination. A prime example is the Hedges House which now sports a siding much different from its original brick. Stucco was also a common remedy and as a result, many houses took on new countenances.

The map below has been adapted from a 1930 Sanborn fire insurance map. This accounts for a few differences the careful observer might find. One prominent omission is the new jail, built on Breckenridge in 1983. Other minor changes can be spotted along the quiet, inviting streets. While some of the area is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Helena Historic District (which extends east to Davis and west through downtown to Park Avenue), the entire area is Register-eligible. A few properties (Porter Flats, Child Carriage House, Silverman House and St. Helena Cathedral) are independently listed. Main elements and a few representative homes have been interpreted here, but there are many more not mentioned. Each is a separate thread woven into the rich historical tapestry; this brief outline is only a corner of the cloth.

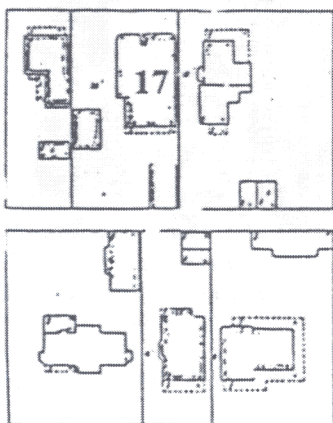
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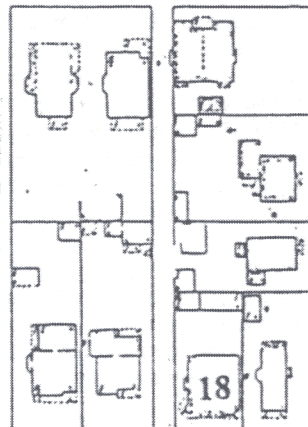
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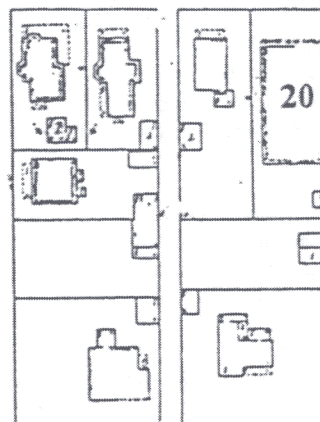
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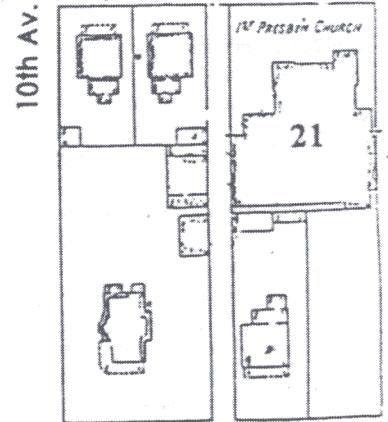
8th Av.



9th Av.



N. Ewing



N. Rodney

N. Rodney